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ABSTRACT

The writing program described in this lesson plan asks students to look closely at their writing, marking speaking parts, and then to return to the beginning to find any places where the "characters clash." During the one 50-minute lesson, students will: explore paragraphing conventions for dialogue; examine their own writing closely using a self-editing activity; and work toward their own empowerment as writers by correcting their own writing. The instructional plan, lists of resources, student assessment/reflection activities, and a list of National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association (NCTE/IRA) Standards addressed in the lesson are included. "Collaborating to Write Dialogues" (Janis Cramer) is attached. (PM)

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Character Clash: A Mini-Lesson on Paragraphing and Dialogue

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Grade Band

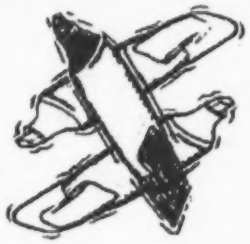
6-8

Estimated Lesson Time

One 50-minute session

Overview

"Paul," asked Kelli, "do you have my shirt?" "The band shirt or the Virginia Tech one?"



The excerpt above is a typical example of how student writers often write dialogue in their stories—they forget to indent paragraphs to indicate a change of speaker, which sometimes creates problems in understanding. This mini-lesson asks students to look closely at their writing, marking speaking parts, and then to return to the beginning to find any places where the "characters clash." When writers include dialogue in their stories, one of the questions that frequently comes up is how to structure texts that have changing speakers or thinkers. This lesson helps students identify the structures that will clarify their text by using colored markers or online resources.

From Theory to Practice

By teaching students how to identify the conventions used in their own writing, self-editing activities such as this paragraphing lesson help students become more responsible writers. The power is shifted from the "correcting" teacher to the writers, who are able to make their own corrections.

Constance Weaver argues in *Grammar for Teachers* (1979), "There seems to be little value in marking students' papers with 'corrections,' little value in teaching the conventions of mechanics apart from actual writing, and even less value in teaching grammar in order to instill these conventions" (64). Instead, learning about grammar, conventions, and text structures (such as paragraphing) is most effective when when student writers "learn through language" (see the information on Literacy Engagements for more details). Contextualized in the students' own writing and their need to communicate with their readers, self-editing activities allow students not only to learn through language but to learn through *their own* language.

Jeff Wilhelm concurs in his brief "Undoing the Great Grammatical Scam!" (2001). Wilhelm explains, "If we want students to use language more correctly in their own writing and speaking, then we must teach them to do so in that meaning-producing situation that will co-produce and support that learning. What we need is the contextualized learning of correct language use" (62). This lesson plan accomplishes that goal.

Read More

Weaver, Constance. 1979. *Grammar for Teachers: Perspectives and Definitions*. Urbana: NCTE.

Weaver, Constance, Carol McNally, and Sharon Moerman. 2001. "To Grammar or Not to Grammar: That is *Not* the Question!" *Voices from the Middle* 8.3 (March): 17-33.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey D. 2001. "Undoing the Great Grammatical Scam!" *Voices from the Middle* 8.3 (March):

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62.

Adapted from O'Keefe, Alice M. 1996. *Motivating Writing in Middle School.* Urbana: NCTE, 111-12.

Student Objectives

Students will

- explore paragraphing conventions for dialogue.
- examine their own writing closely using a self-editing activity.
- work toward their own empowerment as writers by correcting their own writing.

Resources

- Character Clash Instruction Sheet
- Collaborating to Write Dialogue Web Page
- Beginning New Paragraphs Web Page
- Colorful highlighters and/or markers
- Student-selected pieces of writing
- Word processing program or HTML editor and computers (optional)

Instructional Plan

Resources

- Colorful highlighters and/or markers—each student will need several different colors to choose among
- Student-selected pieces of writing
- Copies of the Character Clash Instruction sheet
- Overhead or computer-projected example of narrative for class demonstration
- Word processing program or HTML editor and computers—optionally, students can use computers and the various colors available in one of these programs

Preparation

1. Before this lesson, students will have written a text of some sort that includes dialogue. You might use the lesson plan A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words: From Images to Detailed Narrative.
2. If students are to use word processing programs or HTML editors, you might prepare a sheet that explains how to change font colors in the program.

Instruction and Activities

1. Distribute the Character Clash Instruction sheet (or share the sheet using an overhead).
2. Read an overhead or computer-projected copy of the dialogue example with your class. Alternately, you can use a student example (with the student's permission, of course) or a passage from a book you've read recently as a class.
3. Using the instruction sheet, work through the example text to demonstrate how to complete the activity.
4. Ask students to choose a narrative or another piece of writing that includes dialogue to examine for paragraphing conventions.

5. Allow students to work at their own pace, using the instructions and their own text.
6. Circulate through the room, helping any students who have questions or comments.
7. Collect the highlighted draft with the revised draft.

Web Resources

Beginning New Paragraphs in Narrative Essays
http://www.bsu.edu/classes/english/narpar.html
This Ball State University handout outlines general advice about creating paragraphs in stories. Depending on the writing level of your students, you might use this handout as is or adjust it to match the needs of your students.

Collaborating to Write Dialogue
http://nwp.edgateway.net/pub/nwpr/quarterly/Q2002no3/cramer.html
Taken from the National Writing Project Report, this essay outlines a teacher's use of collaborative activities, such as dramatic enactment of scenes, to help students improve the dialogue in their papers. By writing out sections of the narrative as a dramatic scene, students can easily see the shift in speakers that will need to be represented by paragraphing in the final essay.

Student Assessment/Reflections

Kidwatching provides the perfect assessment for this activity. As you circulate throught the room, note which students understand the concepts and which need more practice. Provide on-the-spot help for any students who need more examples or instruction.

More formal assessment of the paragraphing of the narrative, if you choose to include it, works best as a part of the assessment of the paper itself.

NCTE/IRA Standards

3 - Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

4 - Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

6 - Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

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Character Clash Instructions

As you wrote your story, did you remember that each speaker in your story inhabits his or her own paragraph? If you have forgotten this rule, you have a character clash!

Example:

> Kelli said, "I want my band shirt back right now. You didn't have permission to borrow it." "No," said Paul, "but you didn't have permission to take my CD either, and I can see it on your desk."

The dialogue above should be written in the form of two paragraphs, as shown below:

> Kelli said, "I want my band shirt back right now. You didn't have permission to borrow it."
>
> "No," said Paul, "but you didn't have permission to take my CD either, and I can see it on your desk."

In this mini-lesson, you will check the dialogues in your story for character clashes.

1. Count the speaking characters in your story.
2. Choose a highlighter or marker of a different color for each speaker (or if you're working on a computer, use different color fonts for each speaker).
3. With the first highlighter or marker, highlight the speech of the first character throughout your narrative.
4. Continue through your writing again for every additional speaker, using a different color for each one.
5. Now that you have color-coded each character's remarks, can you guess what you have if you see two or more colors in the same paragraph? That's right—a character clash!
6. Revise any character clashes by starting a new paragraph whenever the speaker changes.

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Collaborating to Write Dialogue
Janis Cramer

After the experience of co-writing dialogue with colleagues, Janis Cramer took the activity back to her high school classroom, hoping to show her students that writing isn't necessarily a solitary activity. As Cramer discovers, however, the real beauty of the activity is that as it teaches students to develop characters, consider word choice, and interweave dialogue and description, it simultaneously strengthens both their cooperative and independent writing skills.

In the early 1980s, I attended my very first writing workshop presented by an Oklahoma Writing Project teacher-consultant. The activity she introduced to us involved writing a dialogue with a partner. For me, this approach was mind-shattering. It was the first time I had realized that writing doesn't need to be a solitary activity.

Our presenter told us to choose a partner, then she assigned us some characters and asked us to develop a plot. Within this framework, we were to write a dialogue. We only had a few minutes to do this, but the time limit forced us to produce, and we discovered how exciting it could be to have someone else to help create ideas.

Returning to the classroom, I tried this activity with my students. As with the workshop model, I let them choose their own writing partners. In advance, I wrote down each set of characters on a note card. I read the list of characters to them so they could be thinking of possible plots, then stood back while they converged on the cards.

Sample Character

- movie star and fanatic fan
- officer and speeder
- psychiatrist and patient
- waiter/waitress and diner
- man on a ledge and psychologist
- principal and student
- hairdresser/barber and client
- teacher and parent
- little sis and big sis
- driving instructor and student driver
- deejay and phone-in listener
- reporter and accident witness
- priest and confessor
- cheerleader and nerd
- girl and boy on blind date
- dogcatcher and dog owner
- player and coach
- two late-night grocery shoppers
- girl's date and little brother or sister
- flight attendant and passenger

- man and God
- angel and devil on character's shoulder

As often happens with students, the activity evolved with a few rough edges that we adults had managed to avoid. Some students had trouble with the time frame. (They were supposed to write a rough draft during class.) Some would spend fifteen minutes talking about possibilities for a plot, then ask if they could change cards. Of course, I let them. In general, however, there was a lot of enthusiasm for the activity. Some even took their partners' phone numbers down so they could finish their writing on the phone that night.

I asked each student to write the dialogue down on his own sheet of paper so that he would have a copy to use later in revision and also so he would have a "script" from which to read the next day when the teams performed their skits for the class. Of course, this performance was the students' favorite part of the activity, as they were able to hear all the dialogues and watch their friends act out and show off in front of the class. It did give the students an opportunity to do an oral presentation, but I questioned the value of the class time it took for each of them to perform.

Perhaps one reason these doubts occurred to me was that, at this point in my teaching career, many of my teaching goals were rather limited. I was looking at this activity as a way to get kids to use quotation marks correctly. I knew from experience that just because they could do the punctuation exercises in the grammar book didn't mean they could transfer those rules to their own writing. My original thought was that if they already had their characters' words written down, they wouldn't have to worry about the creative part, and they could focus on the editing. I was seeing a few trees but not the forest.

After the oral presentation, the students revised on their own. But I gave them a big hunk of work that many weren't ready for. I asked them to add descriptive and narrative details and to add dialogue tags and quotation marks. I told them that now their stories wouldn't be identical anymore, and each student got his own grade for the revision. As a vehicle to grade their knowledge about quotation marks, it was a good assignment. But as I read the revisions, I realized there was oh so much more to be learned from this activity. I just hadn't taken the time to teach it.

Each time I tried this assignment with a new group of students, I thought of ways to expand it so that it became more than just a tool for teaching editing skills. First, I made some significant changes in the structure. I thought it best if students did not choose their own partners. Good bud-dies often waste time not writing, and bright students pair up with other bright students, leaving the weaker ones to fail together. And in the case of some pairs, one person ends up doing all the work. How could I counteract these problems? I cut each of the character note cards into two-piece puzzles, dealt a piece to each student, and stood back while they found the person who held the other piece of their puzzle. This meant they couldn't choose the characters they wanted to write about or the partner with whom they wanted to work, but I hoped these limitations would increase their creativity.

With the new structure in place, I gave my attention to character development. Some students had become frustrated beginning their dialogues because even though the conflict between the two characters was inherent, they were not able to make clear why the characters would react as they did. And because they hadn't thought through the characters, the plots often went no where. All too typical was the following exchange:

Hi, how are you?

I'm O. K.

What you been doin?

Oh nothin much.

So I decided to slow down the process and give the students some help. Now, instead of just writing the dialogue, they were first to prepare a character cluster. (See figure 1.)

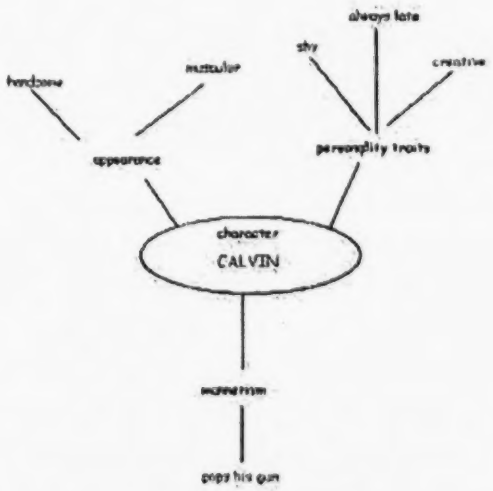

Figure 1

Working in pairs, each student made a cluster describing her character's appearance, personality traits, and mannerisms. Making the character an individual rather than a stereotype helped the pair in imagining how the conflict might play out. It also gave the writers more ownership of their part of the piece.

And I added one more step before students jumped into dialogue writing; I had them brainstorm at least three possible conflicts, and, finally, choose the best one for their skit. Because some of their skits had wandered all over the place, I asked them to limit their dialogue to a single setting with no time lapses. All the changes I had made so far grew from my realization that the kids needed more time to talk before they ever started writing. Good prewriting made the drafting so much easier for them. But allowing more time for prewriting meant that they needed an extra class period to actually write their dialogue. After that, the plots became more focused.

In the past, one of the real weaknesses of their revisions had been a lack of detail development. When I told students to flesh out their dialogue with narrative and description, they didn't really know where to begin. Most of the papers started with a couple of paragraphs describing the setting and characters, followed by the dialogue. The effect was more like a prologue to a play than the short story for which I was hoping.

Hands-on Approach

That's when I came up with the idea of having the students write the dialogue on strips of tagboard rather than on a sheet of notebook paper so that they would be able to expand by literally inserting details later. Each student began with five strips of paper on which to write their characters' spoken words. In an envelope for each pair, I put five strips of blue for one character and five strips of green for another character. But I loaded the

envelope with other colored strips as well.

After they had written their dialogue, they arranged their strips in order and taped them together down the middle. The different colors of paper helped them to identify who was speaking and would help them later with paragraphing.

Next, I had them look at the character clusters they had already developed and come up with ways of adding characterization to the story. Each student took three more strips of paper out of the envelope, a different color for each character. On the first strip, they described the character's appearance without actually using any of the adjectives they'd written in their character clusters.

For instance, if the character's adjectives were *black* and *handsome,* the student might write, "Calvin's high cheekbones and the shape of his nose hinted some Cherokee was mixed in with his African blood." On the second strip, each student was to describe the character's personality, again without actual adjectives. So, rather than saying he was shy, the student might write, "Calvin looked at his shoes as he continued his story, only allowing his eyes to peek at his audience once."

On the third strip, the student was to write one sentence showing the character in action and use one of the character cluster mannerisms. For example, "Calvin's bubblegum cracked in his mouth like BBs falling on a hardwood floor."

Now the pair needed to decide which of these sentences they would use and where to put them, literally cutting and taping them where they best fit into the dialogue. This method of expanding their narrative made a huge difference in their style. Gone were the boring introductory paragraphs. The dialogues were beginning to turn into stories.

Adding Revealing Detail

Next, selecting another colored strip of tagboard, each writer would add a couple of sentences describing other action details to reveal more about the character and to flesh out the skit into a short story, conferring to decide where to tape these strips into the action. For example: "Calvin looked her in the eye to see how he was doing," or, "He straightened the front of his state-champion letterman's jacket with his dark hands."

Oral Presentation

Rather than asking all of the pairs to act out their skits, I asked for volunteers. They could use a minimum of props but were to enhance the development of their characters with mannerisms, facial ex-pressions, tone of voice, and gestures now that they had a much better idea of how their characters looked, spoke, and acted.

After a pair had acted out their skit, the class offered suggestions on what they could add, delete, or change before they wrote their revision. The writers were to listen with open minds to what their peers had to say and decide which if any suggestions to take when they revised.

Adding Dialogue Tags

Now came the job of converting these oral presentations into stories. To do this, it would be necessary to add dialogue tags. I knew from experience some of the problems students would have with this form: they'd add a

tag to every single quote, or always put the tag at the end of the quote, or use no other verb than said or said followed by an adverb.

Using a model from literature or from a former student's paper, I asked them to find all the different ways of handling dialogue in a story. And specifically, I wanted them to explore when dialogue can be used without a tag. We found examples where the speaker is clear from the context of words spoken. Now the students had to decide which quotes would need tags and which ones wouldn't.

Word Choice

I recognized that as we looked carefully at dialogue tags, students would have an opportunity to better understand how a writer makes word choices. I enjoyed the chaos of sending every student to the board at the same time and telling them they couldn't sit down until the entire board was covered with synonyms for said, all in the past tense. The result was an impressive word bank. Using three strips each that I had provided for dialogue tags, the partners selected appropriate tags for their characters in specific situations, working for a variety of tags. I asked them to avoid using the word said more than once and to use adverbs sparingly.

rambled Calvin

mumbled Calvin

Calvin confessed

Mrs. Cramer sneered

she chuckled

interrupted Mrs. Cramer

Students invariably began some sentence combining at this point, adding their action details or character descriptions to their quotes.

"Thank you, friends," mumbled Calvin humbly, nodding his head toward his classmates and heading toward his seat in the back.

Drafting complete, students now had before them a story with interesting characters and a plot developed through dialogue and action details.

Sharing with the Writing Groups

Before I read their drafts, I had the students pairs share what they had written with other pairs and ask their peers for suggestions for improvement.

Sample Questions for the Writing Group

- *Was the conflict clear from the beginning?*
- *Did I capture the characters' personalities?*

- *Does the dialogue sound natural?*
- *Is the plot developed fully enough?*
- *Was it clear who was speaking?*
- *Should I change any of my verbs?*
- *Are all my verbs in past tense?*
- *Did I use variety in placing my dialogue tags?*
- *Should I add more action details anywhere?*
- *Should I add more description?*
- *Is there a part that doesn't fit?*
- *Does the story have an effective ending?*

It worked to have students in these groups write their compliments and suggestions on Post-It Notes and attach them to the draft. I reminded the writers what would be expected to show evidence of their writing group's suggestions when they turned in their work.

Revising

Now it was time for them to transfer what they had written to the computer or to paper, making any changes they found necessary after hearing suggestions from their peers. Sometimes, I treated this final draft as a collaborative assignment. At other times, each student wrote his own version, making changes, elaborating, turning the dialogue into a little short story. In that case, the stories would no longer be exactly the same.

Editing

As we reviewed the placement of commas in dialogue writing, we were not learning punctuation rules and editing skills in isolation. Rather, the students immediately applied what they were learning (or relearning) to a piece they had already written. And, according to students, the whole process of punctuating and paragraphing became easier for them as they worked with the color codes.

But my students and I both know that this lesson is about a lot more than mechanics. As important as the mastery of quotation marks may be, it is now only one of the skills my students practice. The kids have been involved with a process that has shown them ways to create characters and develop plot. They have learned to weave together dialogue, description, and action. Performing their dialogues in front of the class, they have had the opportunity to practice speaking skills. They have considered the importance of word choice and they have had experience combining sentences. Having mastered these skills, the next time they write a story, they won't need a partner.

First Draft

CRAMER: Calvin, this is the third time in a row you've been tardy.

CALVIN: I am sooooo sorry, Mrs. Cramer. I'm ashamed of myself. But I have a good excuse.

CRAMER: Yes, you always do. Well, I'll tell you what. This time I'll let the class decide if it's an excused tardy or not. Why were you late this time, Calvin?

CALVIN: Well, I was trying to get back to school after lunch you know the line was so long and I had to wait forever to get my big Mac and just as I was pulling out of the parking lot onto the highway this big ole semi

smashed into a little yellow Volkswagen.

CRAMER: Oh really?

CALVIN: And I had to decide Am I going to be late to Mrs. Cramer's class again or am I going to try to rescue that poor little baby out of the back seat of that car.

CRAMER: So of course . . .

CALVIN: So of course I really didn't have a choice now did I. So I jerked open the car door, jerked the ki out of his car seat—oh, Mrs. Cramer his little ole face was covered with blood and he was just screaming I handed him to an ambulance driver that just pulled up and then I just reached across the seat and grabbe that poor sobbing screaming Mama out of her seat and dragged her out onto the pavement cause I was sc to death that ole gas truck was goin' to explode any minute and...

CRAMER: So what do you think class—Excused tardy or unexcused?

CALVIN: Thank you, friends. Thank you Mrs. Cramer. I won't be tardy tomorrow. Unless I see a robbery progress or something...

Final Draft

"Calvin, this is the third time in a row you've been tardy." Mrs. Cramer's eyes glowed like the devil's as Calvin walked into class.

"I am sooooo sorry, Mrs. Cramer. I'm ashamed of myself," Calvin confessed, "but I have a good excuse." straightened the front of his state champion letterman's jacket with his dark hands.

"Yes, you always do." She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "'Well, I'll tell you what. This time I'll the class decide if it's an excused tardy or not. Why were you late this time, Calvin?"

Calvin's high cheekbones and the shape of his nose hinted some Cherokee was mixed in with his African blood. "Well, I was trying to get back to school after lunch, you know the line was so long and I had to w forever to get my big Mac," rambled Calvin, his bubblegum crackling in his mouth like BBs falling on a hardwood floor. "Just as I was pulling out of the parking lot onto the highway this big ole semi smashed i a little yellow Volkswagen!"

Rolling her eyes playfully, Mrs. Cramer sneered, "Oh, really?"

Calvin looked at his shoes as he continued with his story, only allowing his eyes to peek at his audience "And I had to decide: Am I going to be late to Mrs. Cramer's class again or am I going to try to rescue th poor little baby out of the back seat of that car?"

"So of course . . . " Mrs. Cramer interrupted.

"So of course I really didn't have a choice, now did I? So I jerked open the car door, tried to untangle the kid out of his car seat. Oh, Mrs. Cramer, his little ole face was covered with blood, there was glass everywhere, and he was just screaming." Calvin looked her in the eye for the first time to see how he was doing. "So I handed him to an ambulance medic that had just pulled up and then I just reached across the seat and grabbed that poor sobbing screaming Mama out of her seat and dragged her out onto the pavement 'cause I was scared to death that ole gas truck was goin' to explode any minute and..."

Suddenly Mrs. Cramer chuckled, "So what do you think, class? Excused tardy or unexcused?"

"Excused!" they all yelled in unison, laughing at Calvin's latest heroic adventure.

"Thank you, friends," mumbled Calvin humbly, nodding his head toward his classmates and heading toward his seat in the back. "Thank you Mrs. Cramer. I won't be tardy tomorrow. Unless I see a robbery in progress or something..."

Janis Cramer, a thirty-year veteran of the classroom, taught creative writing and English at Muskogee High School and Mustang High School in Oklahoma. In 1987, she was a summer institute fellow with the Oklahoma Writing Project, where she is now the co-director in charge of inservice. She has also authored a self-published handbook, "How to Teach Writing (Without Killing Yourself Grading Papers)," which has sold over a thousand copies. Copyright 2002 National Writing Project. All rights reserved.

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